

Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). ISBN 978-0-8028-6676-9.

Gritsch's astonishingly forthright volume divides into three main categories:

- 1- The Riddle of Anti-Semitism
- 2- The Luther Evidence
- 3- After-Effects

By far the most extensive segment is the second in which Gritsch copiously and, it has to be said, painfully offers instance after instance after instance of Luther's clearly, obviously, terribly anti-semitic sentiments. Anti-semitism wasn't a strange seed strangely planted in the garden of Luther's thought- it was one of the main themes.

But before he gets there, Gritsch shows how anti-semitism had been part of the very fabric of much Christian theology from the Church Fathers forward. Gritsch catalogs anti-semitic Christians as far as the horizon of the early church through the Medieval church extends. As far as the eye can see, the Church's landscape is littered with the bones of this dreadful deathly corpse.

Gritsch begins by defining anti-semitism; shows how racism played a central role in the phenomenon in 19th and 20th century Germany and Britain; and then finds the roots of the ideology in the Church. John and Matthew, the Crusaders and the Fathers: all were guilty. The persecution of Jews throughout Europe, by Christian monarchs and clerics, was justified, they believed, by the ancient teachings of the Church itself.

In the early 16th century, Gritsch continues, anti-semitism held sway even over the likes of Reuchlin and Erasmus! But not everyone was captive to its hatred.

Some major and minor reformers displayed constraint. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) in Zurich urged the conversion of the Jews. John Calvin (1509-1564) maintained that the promise of salvation still belonged to the 'children of Abraham' but they must convert to have it fulfilled (pp. 25-26).

And though Gritsch doesn't make this observation it needs to be made: neither Zwingli nor Calvin wrote anything like Luther's 'Against the Jews and their Lies'.

Even some of Luther's own followers found more than a little to distance themselves from him in respect to his view of the Jews. Particularly prominent here is Andreas Osiander. But that doesn't change the fact that Luther, like Hitler (and Gritsch connects the two several times) was an anti-semite of the most virulent sort.

I suggested above that the most extensive section of the book, the second, is where Gritsch discusses in excruciating detail the numerous (almost countless) instances of Luther's anti-semitism. These examples are all drawn from Luther's own texts. Gritsch categorizes these under five chief headings:

- A 'Christian' Old Testament and Judaism
- Traditional Polemics (1513-21)
- An Interlude of Pastoral Evangelism (1521-37)
- A Tragic Conclusion (1538)
- Demonizing Attacks (1539-46)

Unfortunately the older Luther got, the more his vitriolic contempt of the Jews showed itself. By the end of his life, his remarks about the Jews had taken on a demonic aspect. Such hatred as he exhibits is absolutely indefensible and readers of this volume will, like me, doubtless be wondering all the while 'how on earth did Luther get here???' I really don't understand how someone of his intellectual ability and spiritual depth can hold such odious views.

The third and final section of the book attempts to find an answer to the 'why' of Luther's views. Gritsch doesn't absolve Luther and he doesn't blink when assessing the Reformer's hateful ideology.

What he does do, though, is describe how Luther's anti-semitism has been treated in Luther research. He says that Luther's view is a neuralgia, by which he means that Luther's anti-semitism is an 'intense, typically intermittent pain along the course of a nerve' in the body of Lutheranism.

Why did Luther hate Jews? Only Luther knows (if even he does). The consequences of that hatred, though, are significant and terrible. Try as they might, Luther's defenders cannot evade the dreadful truth: Luther's thought laid the groundwork for the Nazi extermination of the Jews and the Germans didn't, as a people, protest too much because Luther was so esteemed and his viewpoint so engrained.

Luther himself, however, acted contrary to his own theological center, against his better judgment, in his treatment of the Jews. Luther violated Luther.

Gritsch next moves to a brief examination of two attempts to understand Luther's hatred of the Jews: one by Walther Bienert and the second by Heiko Oberman. Bienert's view is an *apologia*. In his estimation, it wasn't Luther the theologian who denounced the Jews but Luther the politician. And then

Oberman's Luther is disappointed about the refusal of the Jews to convert
(p. 133).

So, Luther hates the Jews because the Jews hate Christ.

Gritsch concludes

Luther's attitude to the Jews is against his better judgment (p. 138).

Luther's anti-semitism is the dark side of his thought; thought which must not be adopted by Christians. Luther's legacy is thus a negative as well as a positive. Luther teaches us much and does so negatively (that is, in what we must NOT do) in his views of the Jews.

Gritsch's book is a much needed corrective to those who defend or dismiss Luther's ideas concerning the Jews. Luther must be told, in no uncertain terms, that he is wrong. And he is wrong both from the basis of Scripture and from the basis of his own theology.

Students of the Reformation and the history of Modern Christianity owe it to themselves to read this magnificently detailed tome. Gritsch is to be commended for his fearlessness.

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